



Bel Abbey
Blowgun Maker, Wood Carver, and Koasati Storyteller

Bel Abbey was born April 10, 1916, in a Koasati settlement five miles north of Elton, Louisiana. Mr. Abbey was in the last generation to be raised in the traditional Koasati social and economic system. He was taught in the traditional manner by his grandmother, mother, and his maternal uncles. Mr. Abbey had only three years of formal education and learned to read and write during World War II. He passed away in 1991.

Bel Abbey was a skilled hunter and had an astute knowledge of animal behavior. He had an extensive knowledge of natural history and knew the names of hundreds of plants and their uses. In addition, he was extremely well-schooled in the Koasati stories that he had listened to all his life. Mr. Abbey had a great interest in preserving traditional crafts and was skilled in making blowguns, darts, bows, arrows, whistles, Spanish moss spinners, and other items. He preserved many baskets made by his mother, a master of traditional basket weaving.

Mr. Abbey grew up speaking Koasati, a language related to Creek, Alibamu, and Seminole. He had to master English on his own. Later in life, he learned to speak Alibamu, Choctaw, Mobilian, and Cajun French. His amazing linguistics and teaching skills were what attracted ethnologists and linguists to his personal. Bel Abbey would soon become an invaluable resource for anthropologists and historians and as an interpreter for his mother, who only spoke Koasati.

Mr. Abbey was active in his community and church. He sang in the choir and worked with the pastor on projects to benefit the community. His later life was spent working to preserve and share the language, skills, and traditions of Koasati culture. He helped translate the Bible into Koasati and recorded the Koasati language and traditional stories. In 1991, his hard work contributed to the publication of the Koasati Grammar. At the time of his death he was looking over drafts of the Koasati Dictionary.

Mr. Bel Abbey was inducted into the Hall of Master Folk Artists in 1982. He represented the Koasati at the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, The World's Fair in New Orleans, the Louisiana State Folk Festival, and the Smithsonian's National Folk Festival on the Mall.

Updated: November 8, 2016 by Natchitoches-NSU Louisiana Folklife Center Staff